

STYLE IN CINEMA

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UNIVERSITY EXTENSION, UCLA

JEAN RENOIR'S

THE GOLDEN COACH

DECEMBER 7, 1961



THE GOLDEN COACH

Director Jean Renoir

Screenplay Jean Renoir, Renzo Avanzo,
Jack Kirkland, Giulio Macchi

Based on Prosper Merimee's one-act play, LE CARROSSE DU SAINT SACRE-
MENT, which was derived from the same Peruvian story that served as source
material for an episode in Thornton Wilder's THE BRIDGE OF SAN LUIS REY.

Art Director Mario Chiari

Photography Claude Renoir

Editor David Hawkins

Musical Director Gino Marinuzzi

(The music is mainly selected and adapted from Vivaldi, with some Corelli and
Martini, commedia dell'arte songs and traditional airs.)

CAST

Camilla (Columbine) Anna Magnani

The Viceroy Duncan Lamont

Ramon, the Toreador Riccardo Rioli

Felipe Paul Campbell

Don Antonio, leader of the troupe Odoardo Spadaro

The Bishop Jean Debucourt

Made in Italy in English; released in the United States in 1954.

105 minutes--Technicolor

THE GOLDEN COACH

by

Pauline Kael

At his greatest, Jean Renoir expresses the beauty in our common humanity--the desires and hopes, the absurdities and follies, that we all, to one degree or another, share. As a man of the theatre (using this term in its widest sense to include movies) he has become involved in the ambiguities of illusion and "reality", theatre and "life" -- the confusions of identity in the role of man as a role-player. The methods and the whole range of ideas that were once associated with Pirandello and are now associated with Jean Genet are generally considered highly theatrical. But perhaps it is when theatre becomes the most theatrical -- when the theatre of surprise and illusion jabs at our dim notions of reality -- that we become conscious of the roles we play.

Jean Renoir's THE GOLDEN COACH is a comedy of love and appearances. In her greatest screen performance, Anna Magnani, as the actress who is no more of an actress than any of us, tries out a series of love roles in a play within a play within a movie. The artifice has the simplest of results: we become caught up in a chase through the levels of fantasy, finding ourselves at last with the actress, naked in loneliness as the curtain descends, but awed by the wonders of man's artistic creation of himself. Suddenly, the meaning is restored to a line we have heard and idly discounted a thousand times: "All the world's a stage."

The commedia dell'arte players were actors who created their own roles. They could trust in inspiration and the free use of imagination, they could improvise because they had an acting tradition that provided taken-for-granted situations and relationships, and they had the technique that comes out of experience. THE GOLDEN COACH, Renoir's tribute to the commedia dell'arte, is an improvisation on classic comedy, and it is also his tribute to the fabulous gifts, the inspiration, of Anna Magnani. At her greatest, she, too, expresses the beauty in our common humanity. It is probably not coincident with this that Renoir is the most sensual of great directors, Magnani the most sensual of great actresses. Though he has taken Prosper Merimee's vehicle and shaped it for her, it will be forever debatable whether it contains her or is exploded by her. But as this puzzle is parallel with the theme, it adds another layer to the ironic comedy.

Perhaps only those of us who truly love this film will feel that Magnani, with her deep sense of the ridiculous in herself and others, Magnani with her roots in the earth so strong that she can pull them out, shake them in the face of pretension and convention, and sink them down again stronger than ever -- the actress who has come to be the embodiment of human experience, the most "real" of actresses, is the miraculous choice that gives this film its gusto and its piercing beauty. If this woman can wonder who she is, then all of us must wonder. Renoir has shaped the material not only for her but out of her and out of other actresses' lives. Talking about the production, he remarked, "Anna Magnani is probably the greatest actress I have worked with. She is the complete animal -- an animal created completely for the stage and screen... Magnani gives so much of herself while acting that between scenes ... she collapses and the mask falls. Between scenes she goes into a deep state of depression ..." Like the film itself, the set for the film is an unreal world where people suffer. In THE GOLDEN COACH we see Magnani in a new dimension: not simply the usual earthy "woman of the people", but the artist who exhausts her resources in creating this illusion of volcanic reality.

The work has been called a masque, a fairy tale, and a fable -- each a good try, but none a direct hit: the works that move us most are often unclassifiable. **THE GOLDEN COACH** is light and serious, cynical and exquisite, a blend of color, wit, and Vivaldi. What could be more unreal than the time and place -- a dusty frontier in Renaissance Peru. (You can't even fix the time in the Renaissance -- the architecture is already Baroque.) A band of Italian players attempts to bring art to the New World. Magnani is Camilla, the Columbine of the troupe; among her lovers is the Spanish viceroy, who, as the final token of his bondage -- the proof of his commitment to love over position and appearances, presents her with the symbol of power in the colony, the golden coach. Through this formal "taken-for-granted" situation, life -- that is to say, art--pours out--inventive, preposterous, outrageous, buoyant. And in the midst of all the pleasures of the senses, there is the charging force of Magnani with her rumbling, cosmic laughter and her exultant cry -- "Mama mia!"

The script has its awkward side, and those who don't get the feel of the movie are quick to point out the flaws. Some passages of dialogue are clumsily written, others embarrassingly over-explicit ("Where does the theatre end and life begin?" --which isn't even a respectable question.) Much of the strained rhythm in the dialogue may be blamed on the fact that Renoir's writing in English doesn't do justice to Renoir the artist. And, though Magnani herself, in her first English-speaking role, is vocally magnificent, some of the others speak in dreary tones and some of the minor characters appear to be dubbed. The "international" cast --in this case, largely Italian, English and French -- never really seems to work; at the basic level they don't speak the same language. And Renoir allows some of the performers more latitude than their talent warrants; though Duncan Lamont and Ricardo Rioli are marvelous love-foils, Paul Campbell is shockingly inept, and the scenes in which he figures go limp. Another defect is in the directorial rhythm. This was Renoir's second color film -- and as in his first, **THE RIVER**, which was also a collaboration with his great cinematographer-nephew, Claude Renoir, static patches of dialogue deaden the movement -- his sense of film rhythm seems to falter when he works in color. Instead of indulging in the fancy fool's game of Freudian speculation that he fails when he tries to compete with his father, it seems simpler to suggest that he gets so bemused by the beauty of color that he carelessly neglects the language of cinema which he himself helped to develop.

But in the glow and warmth of **THE GOLDEN COACH**, these defects are trifles. When the singing, tumbling mountebanks transform the courtyard of an inn into a playhouse, the screen is full of the joy in creative make-believe. When, at a crucial point in the story, Magnani announces that it is the end of the second act, and the movie suddenly becomes a formalized stage set, we realize that we have been enchanted, that we had forgotten where we were. When the hand of the creator becomes visible, when the actor holds the mask up to view, the sudden revelation that this world we have been absorbed in is not life but theatre brings us closer to the actor-characters. So many movies pretend to be life that we are brought up short, brought to consciousness, by this movie that proclaims its theatricality. And the presence of the artists -- Renoir and Magnani -- is like a great gift. When, in the last scene of **THE GOLDEN COACH**, one of the most exquisitely conceived moments on film, the final curtain is down, and Magnani as the actress stands alone on stage, bereft of her lovers, listening to the applause that both confirms and destroys the illusion, the depth of her loneliness seems to be the truth and the pity of all roles played.

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